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'Homicide': A Heart-Stopping Subway Stop:[FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (593 words)

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"Homicide: Life on the Street" becomes "Life Under the Street" tonight. The series goes off the beaten track -- again -- for a story about a man trapped between a subway car and the platform. Most of the hour is spent with him immobilized from the waist down and the cops trying to determine what happened.

Was the man pushed? Did he jump? Or was this simply a horrible accident?

The episode, at 10 tonight on Channel 4, isn't being billed by NBC as a "very special" one. Every episode of "Homicide" is special. Networks call some shows "appointment television" because viewers make an extra effort to watch them. "Homicide" is also "attention television" because you have to watch it carefully to get the full impact.

And the full impact of tonight's episode is considerable. You may tremble.

It opens during Friday morning rush hour at the Inner Harbor Station of the Baltimore subway system. All seems normal. A man kisses his girlfriend goodbye, and she jogs off into the crowd. He takes the escalator down into the ground and waits for his train to arrive. Then something horrible happens. It's just not clear exactly what.

John Lange, the man who falls into the arriving train, becomes seemingly hopelessly wedged. If rescue workers attempt to move the train, or to move Lange, it's likely he will die. One of the points of the episode, written by producer James Yoshimura and directed with nerve-racking tension by Gary Fleder, is the way an ordinary day, hour, moment, can suddenly become pivotal, fateful, catastrophic.

Lange is played by one of the most versatile and no-nonsensical young actors around, Vincent D'Onofrio, who first got major attention as the mistreated and eventually deranged recruit in Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket." There have been many admirable performances since, including a brief but stunning impersonation of Orson Welles in "Ed Wood."

Obviously most of D'Onofrio's performance in this episode is from the waist up, since the rest of him is hidden beneath the platform. A better way to say it might be that the performance is from the heart out. We don't learn the whole life story of John Lange as the episode progresses, but we learn enough to know he didn't deserve this.

Only a few members of the regular "Homicide" cast appear, but these include the most consistently impressive. Riveting Andre Braugher, as Frank Pembleton, spends most of the hour at Lange's side, trying to figure out what happened, comfort him, control his rages and make some sense of senselessness.

His partner Tim Bayliss, played by Kyle Secor, questions people in the station to see if they can recall that dreadful split-second. Meanwhile, up on the streets, detectives Falsone (Jon Seda) and Lewis (Clark Johnson) search for the girlfriend jogger and make their usual cop small-talk. Actually, it's too small, and their scenes are irritatingly sluggish. But that's a small flaw.

Alfred Hitchcock once directed a famous episode of his old CBS anthology "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" that was about a man trapped and totally paralyzed behind the steering wheel of a crashed car. That was a tour de force for Hitchcock and star Joseph Cotten. This installment of "Homicide" is a tour de force for D'Onofrio and Braugher. It's a helluva tour, and may de force be with them.

[Illustration]

PHOTO,,Michael Ginsberg/nbc CAPTION: Andre Braugher comforts commuter Vincent D'Onofrio after he is trapped by a subway train. CAPTION: Kyle Secor, left, Reed Diamond and Andre Braugher appear regularly on "Homicide: Life on the Street."

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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